

Representative Genetski Testimony on HB 5241

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the Education Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today on House Bill 5241. House Bill 5241 is an effort at allowing well educated experts in the fields of writing and accounting to attain a state teacher's certificate and share their expertise in schools at grades 6-12 throughout Michigan.

Currently Mr. Chair, if one wishes to teach in middle school or high school, he or she, in order to earn a Michigan Teacher's Certificate, must major in what is referred to by the Michigan Department of Education as a "teachable major." Teachable majors range from Language Arts to Math to Physical Education and beyond. House Bill 5241 instructs MDE to place the college majors of "Writing" and "Accounting" among the list of teachable majors. I draw on 14.5 years of teaching experience in requesting this change and some personal experiences that helped me arrive at the need for these two majors in particular to be considered.

During my most recent teaching assignment at Orion Alternative High School, I had the great opportunity of teaching across the hall from a gentleman whose first career was that of a Certified Public Accountant - something to which you Mr. Chairman might relate. After 10 years as a CPA, this gentleman went back to college to become a school teacher. I might note to the committee that in my experience, some of the best and most effective secondary teachers are people who chose one career and left that career to become a teacher.

Upon heading back to school, Bob Groenleer was told that "Accounting" (his former college major) was not a teachable major and that if he wished to teach in Michigan, he would need to go back to undergraduate classes and start with choosing a different major. I would like to also note that the "accounting" major and CPA are very respected credentials in the real world; the curriculum is rigorous, and majors in this field can land a job even in a tough economy in very tough times and make good money. So, when one of these well-trained professionals wants to leave opportunity in the private sector and teach, he or she is pretty exceptional.

Though my former colleague was told he would have to be "reeducated", he was disciplined, had saved money for years for his education, and really wanted to be a teacher, Groenleer followed through and enrolled in undergraduate mathematics classes. Bob completed his undergraduate math major, took his "Education" classes (which are necessary to earn a teaching certificate), completed successful student teaching, and is still teaching today. He is clever and creative and is one of the most popular math teachers I have ever known. Mr. Groenleer is very motivating to his students, and I am very grateful that he was able to afford the extra classes and was able to survive for two years without any income (to pay his mortgage and other bills) while in school to become a teacher. I worry for how many other good people we have kept out of the classroom because they could not afford to go back for a different college major.

I should also note, that basic accounting is taught in many high schools around the state. I took it in high school myself, no doubt many of you did too. As it stands now, neither you, Mr. Chair, nor our governor, could teach high school accounting, without going back to school to earn a "teachable major". I am of the belief that the accounting major who can pass the "basic skills test" and subject area test for "math" (which are necessary for all certified teachers in Michigan)

is going to be well qualified to earn certification and teach grades 6-12 math, provided he or she complete the other state requirements for certification.

As for my request to make "Writing" a teachable major, it is based on similar experiences. I will request that the committee consider for certification the "Writing Major" with the emphasis in "academic writing" or "professional writing" in which students learn skills involved in crafting a resume, drafting professional reports, and business communication as opposed to the "creative writing" emphasis, which is much more narrow in scope and can easily be taught by current English majors.

Let me state for the committee, as a former English teacher, we used to hear constantly from the business community, potential employers, and from college professors that they need our high school graduates to have better writing skills. However, as a state, we fall woefully short on how to improve these critical writing skills among school age students. For example, in order to attain a Michigan Teaching Certificate, no English major (which are the people who do the bulk of the teaching of writing in grades 6-12) is required to have taken a college class in "Grammar, Punctuation, and Usage" and hence, we have a lot of certified English teachers who may not have studied basic grammar skills since their sophomore year of high school or even middle school. Fortunately, those English majors can still become can still become certified to teach grades 6-12 English, because the 100 question subject area certification test for English includes roughly TWO questions dealing with Grammar, Punctuation, and Usage. The message from the state here seems to be that, for our grades 6-12 certified English teachers, knowing how to use a comma really is not that important. And yes, I just heard the nuns who taught many of us as kids gasp at that fact.

Fortunately, for those English majors who become certified teachers but lack knowledge of basic Grammar, Punctuation, and Usage, their students might not pay that bad a price on state-wide standardized assessments because the "writing" portion of the MEAP does not assess spelling and punctuation, or at least it did not when I left the classroom three years ago. Colleagues, in the real world, spelling counts and, so do run on sentences, but I challenge you to find a recent English Education graduate who can tell you the definition of an "independent clause"- necessary in identifying a "run on" sentence but rarely taught in teacher education programs. The three student teachers I had in my teaching tenure could not define an "independent clause"- each came to me from their teacher preparation institutes with stellar grades and references.

There are many more reasons why "Johnny can't write" directly related to failures of state government, however, I will spare you the list. What I will say is that my interactions with "writing majors" offer a solution to helping Johnny learn to write. The sophomore and junior writing majors at Grand Valley State University who helped tutor my high school classes showed more knowledge of the teaching of writing than many, if not most of the certified English teachers I have met in my career. Rep. Joan Bauer also seems to be impressed by the "writing major." She recently hired an MSU graduate in writing for her office, and I am impressed with the young lady's skills and knowledge as well. They graduate with a lot of the skills liberal arts majors used to have back when college kids were taught how to think rather than what to think. These are talented and smart people attaining the writing degree, but like Bob Groenleer, after

they graduate, they have to go back to earn another undergraduate major to teach grades k-12 in Michigan. We as a state do Michigan kids and employers (who need to see more writing skills from our high school graduates) a terrible disservice by not including "writing" as a teachable major within the Department of Education. As I ask you to consider voting for HB 5241, I will note that writing majors do come with a different skill set than English majors. Therefore, if banks need reports written in "sonnet form" or insurance companies want their fine print written with extra metaphors, simile and personification, the writing major might not be the best candidate, but if employers want professional writing done well and punctuated properly, my money is on the writing major. And our k-12 students need to learn from people with these skills.

By and large, from what I have seen and read, I will agree with the Michigan Department of Education. There are a lot of bogus college majors out there that should not be considered a "teachable major," but I believe that leaving the "accounting" and "writing" majors off the list is an oversight and, for many people, creates an economic barrier to entry to the field of teaching.

Thank you for taking testimony on House Bill 5241. I hope you will give it strong consideration.

